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A man in a white t-shirt and blue jeans is walking across a series of seven white, rectangular blocks arranged in a descending staircase pattern on a dark, textured floor. He is captured mid-stride, stepping onto the fourth block from the left. The blocks are evenly spaced and create a clear path for him to follow.

Seven Stepping Stones to Success

By W. James Popham

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PREVIEW Formative assessment is a planned process that uses assessments to inform changes in instruction or learning.

Because of its focus on instruction and learning, formative assessment is based in the classroom, although school-level structures, such as learning communities, can support the process.

A ongoing, modest implementation of formative assessment is far more effective than an elaborate implementation that is quickly abandoned because it is too overwhelming.

Seven is surely a special number. Mention the number seven, for example, and film buffs immediately think of Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* or its English-language successor, *The Magnificent Seven*. True-blue mystery fans, especially older ones, hark back to the popular 1913 novel *Seven Keys to Baldpate*, which—coincidentally—became the source for seven different films. Finally, gamblers who surround any casino's craps table give singular deference to the number seven. Seven is, most certainly, a special number.

Turning from numbers to the current world of education, there is something out there now that seems to be every bit as special, and it is called "formative assessment." You'll find it is almost impossible to attend any educational conference these days without encountering presenters who offer a paean to the instructional glories that formative assessment can stimulate.

So, in an unsubtle attempt to splice two special commodities together, I want to lay out seven stepping-stone "understandings" that secondary school principals need to

possess if they wish to add formative assessment to their leadership repertoires. In concert, those seven understandings will contribute to successful formative assessment.

What It Is and What It Isn't

It's difficult for anyone to work with a concept that's not fully understood. Accordingly, if a school administrator gets serious about cuddling up to formative assessment, a beginning place is obviously the acquisition of a clear-headed understanding about what formative assessment is and what it isn't.

Although there have been some minor definitional skirmishes during the last decade about the "true" meaning of formative assessment, most specialists working with formative assessment agree with the chief tenets embodied in the following definition: formative assessment is a planned process in which assessment-elicited evidence of students' status is used by teachers to adjust their ongoing instructional procedures or by students to adjust their current learning tactics (Popham, 2008).

Let's take a look at the key dimensions of this definition. For starters, formative assessment is a process, not a test; moreover, it's a *planned* process, not a spur-of-the-moment activity. During this planned process, evidence—collected through formal or informal assessments—is used to get an accurate fix on students' current skills, knowledge, or affect. At that point, either teachers decide whether to adjust their instruction or students decide whether to adjust how they're trying to learn something. The goal of formative assessment, therefore, is to supply assessment-elicited evidence by which teachers or students try to enhance learning.

If this is what formative assessment is, what is it not? Well, there's really no such thing as "a formative test." Tests might be part of the formative assessment process, but formative assessment consists of a series of evidence-collecting and decision-making events—not merely a test. But if formative assessment is a planned process, then it should be apparent that when teachers engage in instant lesson-jiggling, it is not formative assessment. Suppose, for instance, a teacher notices that her students seem to be bored with what's currently going on in class. If the teacher switches to another activity, that's most likely a good thing to do, but those sorts of intuitive adjustments in class activities are not the same as formative assessment.

The sorts of periodically administered tests being peddled with great zeal these days by commercial vendors—vendors who often plaster a "formative" label on such tests—are also not formative assessment. Sometimes referred to as "interim" or "benchmark" assessments, these tests are typically administered every few months or so as part of a districtwide assessment program. Such periodic tests may be useful in evaluating schoolwide or districtwide programs, and may also predict how well students are likely to perform on a subsequent accountability test—but there is currently no body of research evidence attesting to their worth. Moreover, to refer to such tests as "formative" constitutes either verbal carelessness by a commercial firm or, more likely, downright deception.

Because formative assessment involves teachers or students making adjustments in what they are currently up to, then formative assessment really needs to take place in the classrooms where teachers and students can make changes in what they are doing (or what they intend to do shortly). Accordingly, principals should be wary of commercial vendors who tout "research-proven" formative assessment systems. Formative assessment, to be genuine, must revolve around evidence-based adjustments that are linked to a

given teacher and that teacher's students. Bona fide formative assessment, therefore, always needs to be rooted in classroom assessment.

What It Can Do and What It Can't

Most, but not all, of the empirical evidence supporting formative assessment comes through the efforts of two British researchers, Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam, who compiled a compelling review of about 250 published classroom-assessment studies drawn from almost 700 such reports. After systematic scrutiny, they concluded that "the research reported herein shows conclusively that formative assessment does improve learning" (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Moreover, they pointed out that the student gains in learning triggered by formative assessment were "amongst the largest ever reported for educational interventions."

So it is apparent that formative assessment works—and it works big time. What's especially appealing about the findings of this important review is that there seems to be no anointed way that the formative assessment process must be employed to be successful. As Black and Wiliam (1998) pointed out, "Significant gains can be achieved by many different routes, and initiatives here are not likely to fail through neglect of delicate and subtle features." Putting it differently, formative assessment is a potent, robust way of improving the quality of a teacher's instruction. It really does work, and it appears to work especially well for slow learners.

But what formative assessment can't do is also important for secondary school principals to recognize. First off, there is almost a certainty that when teachers install formative assessment in their classes with any sort of reasonable care, students will learn more. But this increased learning will typically not yield appreciable improvements of students' scores on external accountability tests. Sadly, most of the statewide tests now used to satisfy the accountability requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) are instructionally insensitive—that is, those tests are unable to accurately distinguish between effective and ineffective instruction. Too many of today's accountability tests have been constructed in such a way that they measure the affluence of a school's student body, rather than the skill with which those students have been taught.

Although classes where formative assessment has been installed will often see some minor test-score improvements, even on instructionally insensitive accountability tests, rarely will those improvements be sufficiently large to satisfy the substantial improvements demanded by NCLB.

Principals should not mistakenly believe that formative assessment can become the magic pathway leading them out of the NCLB maze.

Why Levels Can Lead to Lucidity

Because there are two potential sets of players (teachers who adjust their instruction and students who adjust their learning tactics), it frequently causes confusion to treat formative assessment as a single, undifferentiated amalgam. What's more, because substantially different varieties and degrees of implementation can take place, clarity can quickly be compromised when educators regard formative assessment as a unitary commodity. Accordingly, many educators will find it more useful to conceptualize formative assessment as a set of related but separate levels that do not need to be implemented at the same time. Thus, a particular principal may wish to urge the adoption of one or more of the following four levels:

Level 1. Teachers' instructional adjustments: teachers collect evidence that they use to decide whether to adjust their current or immediately upcoming instruction

Level 2. Students' learning tactic adjustments: students use assessment evidence to decide whether to adjust the procedures they're using in an effort to learn something

Level 3. Classroom climate shift: the overall nature of a classroom is altered in its expectations for learning, the responsibility for that learning, and the role of classroom assessment

Level 4. Schoolwide implementation: a school or a district adopts one or more levels of formative assessment—chiefly through the use of professional development or teacher learning communities.

As you can see, there are activities that apply to one but not all of these levels. Failing to distinguish among the separate dimensions of this enterprise can make a principal's interaction with formative assessment more perplexing than productive.

Why Learning Progressions Must Lurk

A "learning progression" is a sequenced set of building blocks (that is, subskills or bodies of enabling knowledge) that students must learn en route to mastering a more remote, target curricular aim. In days of yore, such sequences were called "task analyses." So, how are learning progressions involved in the formative assessment process? Well, just about every person who writes about formative assessment recognizes that if this process is going to be successful in helping students learn better, there must be judicious

A First Date With Formative Assessment

Because I was convinced that formative assessment could markedly help students, and because I was worried that many commercial vendors were deceitfully hijacking the term *formative*, about a year ago I responded with enthusiasm when editors at the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) asked me to write a book about formative assessment, *Transformative Assessment*, which was published in April 2008.


Because the book is well-suited for use by a professional learning community over an extended period of time, I also wrote a guide to assist such learning communities. You can obtain a copy of the guide at no charge from www.ascd.org/studyguides where, by scrolling down to *Transformative Assessment*, you can also find information about how to obtain a copy of the blessed book itself.

decisions regarding when assessment evidence should be collected from students. A teacher can't assess kids every minute or there'd be no time left to teach them. Thus, sensible formative assessors try to think through carefully just when it would make the most sense to gather assessment evidence from their students.

Because the instructional pursuit of almost any high-level cognitive outcome will involve students mastering certain along-the-way building blocks, such as a key body of enabling knowledge or a significant cognitive subskill, the most pedagogically astute way to structure the evidence gathering is to find out whether students have successfully mastered the building blocks in a learning progression. A well-crafted learning progression—one that is not too complicated—constitutes the undergirding of effective formative assessment. Formative assessment without a learning progression is akin to a human body without bones. Neither of them can stand up well.

What the Essence of It Is

The heart of formative assessment—revealed by stripping away all of sometimes-appealing and sometimes-off-putting trappings—is its constant reliance on the use of assessment-elicited evidence to make adjustment decisions. To illustrate, teachers who adopt formative assessment in their classrooms will need to become habitually attentive to the results of formal and informal assessments as they



consider their next instructional moves. Students who employ formative assessment will frequently need to evaluate the adequacy of their learning tactics not according to how much they enjoy those tactics, but according to the assessment evidence that a learning tactic is actually working. In classrooms where formative assessment is working properly, there is continuing attention to the measured effects of whatever teaching and learning procedures are being used.

The Rightsize Rule

Although formative assessment works, it can't help students learn better if it isn't used. And this is precisely one of my main fears about the widespread implementation of formative assessment. I've observed professional development sessions where formative assessment is described in such a complicated and off-putting way that few educators in the audience display any interest in playing such a complex game. It is far better for principals to advocate a modest implementation of formative assessment that continues to be used over the years than it is to push for a super-elaborate version of formative assessment that teachers will abandon in a few months.

Why Dawdling Is Dumb

Formative assessment helps students learn. It helps teachers be more instructionally effective and principals transform their schools into places where students are educated more successfully. In short, formative assessment can pay off for all those who are touched by it.

Why on earth would a principal postpone learning more about the innards of formative assessment? Having learned more about the innards of formative assessment, why on earth would a principal delay installing at least some level of formative assessment in his or her school? I have no answer to either of those questions. **PL**

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